

Casanave Building
1211-15 11th Avenue
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5519

HABS
PA.
7-ALTO,
98-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CASANAVE BUILDING

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98-

Location: 1211-15 11th Ave., Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Frank West, 1019 4th Ave., Altoona, Pa. 16601.

Present Use: A bar is on the southeast side, first floor. The rest of the building is vacant.

Significance: The Casanave Building is a classic and now-rare example of the kind of large, red-brick commercial buildings that dominated the downtown streetscape in the late nineteenth century. Described in 1892 as "one of the largest and most handsome brick business blocks in Altoona," the four-story, rectangular building features a virtually unaltered interior, with a stage in the fourth-floor hall.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1892-94. A history of Blair County published in 1892 noted that the Casanave Building had been "just completed," but tax assessments indicate that substantial finishing work continued through 1894.¹
2. Architect: The building has never been attributed to a particular architect, although a likely candidate is Charles M. Robinson, who designed many of the commercial buildings featured in Illustrated Altoona, a hoosterist history published in 1896. The Casanave Building bears close stylistic resemblance to Robinson's Nicholson Building of 1893, which had comparable proportions and a similarly organized facade featuring arcaded third-floor windows and piers flanking the central bay.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The building was constructed for Germaine Casanave (d. 1922), Altoona's most successful saddle and harness manufacturer, who had his retail leather goods business on the first floor. In ca. 1946, the Casanave estate sold the building to E. Raymond Smith, whose Philadelphia Drug Store had been a longtime tenant on the southeast side of the first floor. Joseph Martino bought the property in 1968, two years after the drug store closed. In 1981 he sold the building to Gary Kimmel who then sold it to Douglas West in 1989.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown.
5. Original plans and construction: The first floor had one store on either side of the main entrance. A ca. 1893 photograph shows the storefronts with plate-glass display windows and recessed entrances. A narrow cornice with pairs of scrolled brackets was directly above the windows, visually separating the first-floor commercial space from the rest of the building. Suites of offices were located on the second and third floors. The fourth floor consisted of a large, open hall equipped with a stage on the 13th Avenue end. The building was also topped by a pediment, since removed, which read "CASANAVE BLOCK." Except for the stores on the first floor, the original plan remains intact.

¹This comment, and the observation cited in the statement of significance, can be found in Samuel T. Wiley and W. Scott Garner's Biographical and Portrait Cyclopedia of Blair County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Gresham Publishing Co., 1892), 263. See also, tax assessments for Altoona's First Ward, 1891-94, Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

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6. Alterations and additions: In 1915, the original one-story, frame warehouse to the rear of the building was replaced by a two-story, L-shaped brick structure with a flat roof. This building housed a second Casanave family enterprise, the Altoona Drug and Chemical Company, which was in business from 1915-32.

The Philadelphia Drug Store was founded on the southeast side of the Casanave Building in 1911. In 1946-48, it expanded into the space formerly occupied by Casanave's saddlery, taking over the entire first floor. A new storefront, finished in jade green vitrolite trimmed in black, was constructed under the supervision of contractor George Bott. On the interior, the pharmacy was separated from the other departments and moved to the northeast side of the building; a through-passage was cut to connect them.

A 1948 article described the interior of the drug store:

Store fixtures are trimmed in blond maple with prima verra trim, backed with mirrors giving a brilliance to all items on display. The display cases are in matching wood and the intervening wall space is panelled and mirrored. The walls are finished in jade green matching the color of the store front, and are trimmed in white, with decorative wall brackets at the ceiling junctures. The floor is finished in permanent terrazzo, with black trim.

The rear addition was turned into two large stock rooms for the drug store. The first floor served as a receiving room, while the second floor was used for maintaining reserve stocks. (Philadelphia Drug Store's, grand re-opening announcement, Altoona Mirror [April 7, 1948])

In ca. 1949 the drug store built a two-story addition on its 13th Avenue end, which now houses the offices of the American Automobile Association of Blair County. The building retains one clue to previous use: the main entrance at the corner of 11th Street and 13th Avenue has an approach step with a mortar and pestle in multi-colored terrazzo.

In the late 1960s, the southeast side of the first floor was converted into a bar-lounge. The second- and third-floor offices were turned into individual sleeping rooms, but none of the interior walls were altered. Some of these rooms have dropped ceilings with fluorescent lighting and wall-to-wall carpeting. The fourth floor was refloored to accommodate a private gymnasium; a full boxing ring remains in the building.

The Tudor-style storefront and new entrance doors were installed in the early 1980s. The building's original pediment was removed sometime after 1946.

B. Historical Context:

Born in southwest France, Germaine Casanave followed his brother Francis D. Casanave, a machinist, to Altoona in 1870. Francis D. was promoted to master mechanic of the PRR's local shops and transferred to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he advanced to superintendent of motive power. Later, he transferred back to Altoona as general superintendent of motive power, and resided in the PRR's Italianate double house on 11th Avenue.²

Germaine Casanave remained in Altoona, establishing the largest saddlery in town, first at 1328 11th Ave.,

²"The French," Altoona Tribune (January 16, 1916), sec., 2, 12.

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and after 1898, in his own building. He was an influential, behind-the-scenes figure in local politics, for many years reserving the top floor of the Casanave Building for private political meetings and discussion.³ Casanave lived in the prestigious residential neighborhood directly behind his shop; in addition to his home at 1105 13th Ave., he owned a frame double house at No. 1103, and a brick-veneered double house at Nos. 1107-09.

The Philadelphia Drug Store was founded as the Philadelphia Medicine Company by William Coleman Taylor in 1895. The name was changed to the former when E. Raymond Smith and Richard Jones purchased full interest in the company in 1911. Not coincidentally, Jones was also a founding partner in the Casanaves' Altoona Drug and Chemical Company. The drug store boasted one of the first motorized delivery services in Altoona, instituted in 1928, and the largest inventory of pharmaceuticals between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Branch stores were established at 2392 Broad Ave. and 729 4th Ave. in 1932. In 1966, the locally popular drug store--a landmark on 11th Avenue--closed its doors for good.

Over the years, the building has housed such diverse tenants as attorneys, a dance school, and a dental lab. After the final departure of the PRR in the 1960s, the demand for office space in Altoona fell dramatically. In the late 1960s, Joseph Martino, a professional boxer, converted the second- and third-floor offices into a boarding house, and transformed the fourth-floor meeting hall into his private gymnasium. Two new businesses were established on the first floor: a bar-lounge, which continues to operate at No. 1211, and the Greyhound bus station, which remained at No. 1213 until Altoona's new transportation center opened in the 1980s. The upper three stories have been vacant since they were damaged in a recent fire.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The flat facade of the Casanave Building is enlivened by the varying textures of patterned brickwork, molded brick panels, and rusticated stone accents around the windows.
2. Condition of fabric: Good-fair. The building is quite sound despite some recent water and fire damage.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The four-story, rectangular brick structure measures approximately 69' (nine bays on 11th Avenue) x 60' (five bays along the alley and 13th Avenue ends). The rear addition measures approximately 42' x 32'.
2. Foundations: Not visible.
3. Walls: Red brick in common bond. The second, third and fourth stories are arranged in nine bays; the center bay is separated from the others by full-height, brick piers. Molded, rectangular brick panels are inset in the spandrels of the central bay.
4. Structural system: The building has brick bearing walls and wood and steel joists.
5. Chimneys: Pairs of interior chimneys project through the roof on the northwest and southeast

³Jack Casanave, telephone interview by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., July 6, 1989.

facades. The chimneys are rectangular in section and laid in common bond.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The entrance to the upper floors has a glass transom window with "1211-13" stencilled in gold and black. A back entrance on the alley facade has been bricked up.
- b. Windows: On the 11th Avenue facade, the first-floor windows have been replaced by modern storefronts; the windows on the second and third floors have flat arches and one-over-one-light, double-hung sash; the fourth-floor windows are arcaded, with round-arched sash. On the alley facade, the three first-floor windows have been bricked up; those on the second, third and fourth floors have one-over-one-light, double-hung sash. All of the windows on the facade have rusticated, stone lintels and sills, while those on the alley facade have segmental brick arches. Many of the windows are broken; some of these have been boarded up.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape: The low-pitched hipped roof is covered with green composition roofing. The rear building has a flat roof covered with built-up roofing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The pressed-metal cornice has a foliated frieze.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: An unfinished basement with rough-cut, semi-coursed, stone walls, a concrete floor, and exposed ceiling framing, extends the length and width of the building.
- b. First: The original plan has been obscured by recent renovations.
- c. Second: There is a center hall, running longitudinally, lit with one window on the alley end. Two shorter, transverse corridors open off the main hall and extend back to the rear wall of the building on either side of the central stairwell. Offices originally opened off of these halls; there were five along the front of the building, two along the alley end, and one on the 13th Avenue end.
- d. Third: The back stair opens directly into what appears to have been a waiting room. The waiting room opens onto an irregularly shaped, open floor with three offices along the front of the building and two storage rooms in the rear.
- e. Fourth: The fourth floor consists of a large, open hall with a stage on the 13th Avenue side.

2. Stairways: The stairway between the first and second floors is located opposite the entrance in a narrow stair passage. Its landing is along the rear wall. This stairway has a prominent newel post, turned balusters and wood treads. The stairway to the upper floors is located in the southwest corner of the building and raises along the rear wall.

3. Flooring: Narrow pine boards are used throughout the building. The entrance lobby is covered

with old linoleum.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The first-floor hall, stairway, and second-floor hall have wainscots of vertical beaded boards, decorative wood baseboards, and pressed-metal ceilings. On the third floor, the walls and ceiling are plaster on lath. The fourth floor has a new ceiling and exposed brick walls.
 5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entrance hall has a set of inner double doors with a transom and sidelights. On all floors, the interior doors have five rectangular panels with chamfered edges. The doorways on the second and third floors have rectangular glass transom windows and molded surrounds with bull's-eye corner blocks. The stage is essentially an interior wall with a large, rectangular opening in the center. That opening is finished with a molded surround and bull's-eye corner blocks.
 - b. Windows: The windows have the same molded surrounds and bull's-eye corner blocks as the doors and the stage.
 6. Mechanical systems:
 - a. Heating: Steam.
 - b. Lighting: Original metal lighting fixtures are in place throughout the building.
- D. Site: The building stands at the head of Chestnut Avenue, facing northeast on 11th Street. Before urban renewal projects of the late 1940s-60s levelled several of the area's major commercial and ecclesiastical buildings for parking lots, this was regarded as the busiest intersection in Altoona.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None located.
- B. Early views:
 1. Art Work of Blair County (Chicago: The W. H. Parish Publishing Company, 1893), contains a photograph of the building in its original, unaltered state.
 2. A 1946 file photograph in the Altoona Mirror library shows the building with its original pediment. The first U.S. Post Office, at the northeast corner of 11th Street and Chestnut Avenue, is under demolition in the foreground.
 3. A photograph of the modernized Philadelphia Drug Store facade, together with an interior view of the store's new prescription department, appear in the Altoona Mirror, April 7, 1948.
- C. Interviews:

Jack Casanave, grandson of Germaine Casanave, telephone interview by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., July 6, 1989.

Frank West, father of the current owner, interviews by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., summer 1989.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary sources:

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Building Record, Deed Books and Tax Assessments, Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

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"Philadelphia Drug Store Plans Opening." Altoona Mirror (April 7 1948).

2. Secondary sources:

Clark, Charles B. Illustrated Altoona. Altoona: Privately printed, 1896.

"Philadelphia Drug Store Long Established," Altoona Mirror (June 13, 1939).

"This is My Birthday--Germaine Casanave," Altoona Mirror (April 23, 1920).

Untitled history of the Philadelphia Drug Store, typescript, March 8, 1948.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.